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A RETURN TO THE DAKOTA LAKE REGION

By FLORENCE MERRIAM BAILEY

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VII. THE GEM OF THE SWEETWATERS IN COVE AND SHORE

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THE conditions that make the Coulee a favorite resort of families of water birds make the small easternmost lake of the Sweetwater chain the chosen home of hordes of birds. While almost in sight from the traveled Belgrade Bridge, a mile to the west of it, the lake is so completely cut off by the moat-like Coulee and its marshy venous meshwork that the nearest way to it by road from the Bridge is five or six miles around along the northern oval of the mail carrier's route, which crosses the moat on the grass-grown, black framed Coulee Bridge and making a broad loop out over grain fields comes no nearer than the far side of a wide field from the lake on its way back to town.

Remote and out of evidence to start with, the little lake has many other advantages. Nearly round, it is only about three quarters of a mile across, so that the wind has less sweep than over the larger lakes, and when it blows too hard, sheltering banks protect the birds, for its surface is sunk well below the level of the surrounding grain fields and scattered bordering clumps of trees. On three sides the lake is fringed by sheltering tule marsh and on the fourth by a protecting strip of woods; while additional shelter is afforded by tule islands, long streaks of tule across the middle of the lake, between which the water fowl can gather at a safe distance from passersby along the shore. Lying close to the marsh-bordered Coulee and a long pasture slough on whose edges large flocks of Ducks rest when not feeding, the small Sweetwater has also within a mile or so, three open-shored lakes, to which the Ducks that spend their days on the small lake can fly for greater security at night. All these conditions make the east Sweetwater so popular among both Ducks and hunters that a hunting lodge formerly near the north Sweetwater pass, during a recent winter was moved on the ice down the Coulee to this lake. Between this vacant hunting lodge in the woods on the south shore and the farmhouse heading the grain fields on the north end of the lake is a grassy road following the east shore, and as I walked back and forth over it, often just to see what birds were there, frequently on my way around the lake or out to the mail box in the wheat field, I had ample opportunity to become acquainted with its many tenants.

Among the most interesting were the Black-crowned Night Herons, and they were often seen on fence posts leading down into the lake at the ends of pasture lines, as well as standing at the foot of tules, either on the islands or along the marshy border of the lake; preferably half hidden by a thin tule veil. Sometimes one would be seen clambering around among the black rods of a tule island, or rising from a blind with a loud *squawk*. They were seen at all hours of day, and found fishing in the afternoons, but as their name indicates, their normal fishing habit was probably best illustrated by one seen at 7:40 P. M. flying across the lake and lighting at the edge of a tule island as if ready for night work.

In driving by the shore on August 14, nine of the large birds were flushed, so many in the brown plumage of the young that it was evident a family had been launched. A young one seen on a fence post reflected in the water, by help of the glass showed the characteristic red eye and yellowish green bill and legs. In one of the dark-backed adults mounted on a post, the usually creamy forehead and chin were a beautiful yellow, and he appropriately raised his yellow foot to scratch his sulphury throat.

A section of fence extending into the lake at the corner nearest the farmhouse was one of the favorite perches of the Herons, and they got so used to seeing me go along that they would not rise when I passed. At sunset one night a party of them was fishing in this corner; the adults perched on posts. The young in alighting among the tules would flap their brown-striped wings over the marsh, their long yellowish green legs dangling in indecision till their owners finally got courage to let themselves down among the sharp pointed reeds.

One of the old Herons, an Eager Fisherman, on the post farthest out in the lake, watched the water for a long time, head down, legs bent, and toes hanging over the edge of the post, ready to drop at the flash of a minnow; but though many came to the surface not far away, none came to his net. Again and again he started to lift his wings, evidently from false hopes. An inexperienced young one on an adjoining post was an amusing contrast in pose and method to the Eager Fisherman. Instead of leaning over, ready to drop on his prey, he stood with body erect, legs straight, and feet firmly planted on the middle of the post. But although he had much to learn, before long he began to look at the water with signs of intelligence, and to get his spear ready for action.

A second brown streaked one flew over and lit on the barbed wire between posts just above the surface of the water, close to the post of the Eager Fisherman, who, although his prospective minnows were probably scared away by the interruption, turned with evident interest toward the young one who may well have been his son. A third young Heron tried to light on the wire farther from the supporting post but wobbled so much, in spite of raised wings, that he had to give up the attempt. He then flew to his inexperienced brother on the post, but was jabbed at by a long bill till he had to go about his business. And, sad to relate, before the Eager Fisherman had ever caught anything, another adult came and took forcible possession of his post!

While this pantomime was progressing, some of the other Herons did a most surprising thing. One would fly out beyond the last post, and hesitating, almost hovering over the water, peer down into it; then go on; after a while coming back to try again, and finally with dangling legs let itself cautiously down till up to its body in water, when it sat there horizontally like a Duck, looking as awkward and uncomfortable as you would expect a long-legged Heron to do in so unnatural a position. Then suddenly it would shoot forward and fly up with something—probably a minnow—dangling from its bill! What was the explanation? How could a long-legged Heron sit on the water? At first I thought there might be submerged fence posts to stand on, but then remembered the muskrat houses said to have been in sight the year before when the water was lower, and realized that two of the Herons lit just about far enough apart to be standing on two ends of a long house. The farmer confirmed this theory, saying that while there were no fence posts, there were submerged muskrat houses.

On the posts where the Night Herons fished, Black Terns were frequently seen early in August feeding their young, with whose cries the shore resounded. While the crying young ones stood on the fence posts their parents would fly above, and hovering over them a moment, with long bills extended, feed them on the wing. A family was seen sitting in a row on some sliver in the lake, one day, and to my great amusement a Duck sitting near watched them, moving its head as they moved; but soon, as if tired of the confusion, it swam off to more quiet waters. In another place one of the facile-winged birds was seen see-sawing over the water catching insects for its evening meal. Darting hither and yon, the picturesque terns often added a sudden touch of life to a quiet landscape. In one case, on an August afternoon when a row of cows stood cooling themselves in the shallow water shaded by the trees along shore, and Bank Swallows were skimming over the still white surface of the lake, suddenly a flock of the long-winged Black Terns swept in and darted about over the surface till the water seemed all a'move with long wings.

In striking contrast to these swift-flying birds of the air were the principal residents of the east side of the lake, the Coots and Pied-billed Grebes. They are so frequently associated that it seems as if the marks that differentiate them at different ages might have developed through the long periods of that association. As they are about the same size and both look blackish across the water, they need distinguishing marks; and the dusky little boats carry good signals, both fore and aft. The white knife-blade bill of the Coot, which in full face seems almost to divide its physiognomy, is a striking character, but nature as if to make assurance doubly sure has, optically, cut off the tip of the bill of the Grebe by means of the dark band that gives it the name of Pied-bill. The dark area around the bill and the dark chin mark of the Pied-bill seem thrown in for extra measure of contrast to the plain black, velvety head and slaty neck of the Coot. The rear light of the Coot, however, seems the crowning achievement of nature, for at times it suggests, in miniature, the white rump patches that the antelope flashes in moments of danger. A good illustration of its directive value came to me one day. Out across the lake was a white spot—was it the head patch of the Ruddy or the white breast of the Western Grebe, I asked myself. Raising the glass, it proved the white under tail coverts of the Coot!

Nature is never satisfied, however. When her work seems done, her aim accomplished, she keeps on adding artistic touches. In this case it is not the exquisitely delicate pen and ink work with which she delights the artistic student of protective coloration, but something more broadly effective—pose. The Coot goes about with long neck craned forward; the squat Pied-bill nervously lowers its flat snaky head. At too great a distance for any of these points to be noted, the Pied-bill settles the question by rising and showing its white belly, or turning on its side and flashing its white Grebe breast. The young of the Coot and Pied-bill, while markedly different from their parents have easily distinguished characters, for while the young Coot has a plain pale gray neck, the young Pied-bill has the characteristic markings of the downy Grebes—black and white stripes down the neck.

The weak appealing notes of these young were almost always to be heard along the wide tule border of the east shore of the lake; and when, during harvesting, the reaper cut the wheat by the Herons' corner, I was able to get down close to the curve of the shore and look up the irregular tule front with

its secluded by-ways. In this intimate protected harbor, I was pleased to find a mother Pied-bill at home with her downy brood of striped necked chicks, diving and feeding them in assured security. After a time, probably on discovering me, she raised her head and, to my great satisfaction, gave the Cuckoo call—*cluckukukuk*—the identity of which had been perplexing me all summer. It was evidently an alarm note or rallying cry, for in answer to it her brood followed her into the tule waterways, peeping like little chickens. Letting them swim on ahead of her she dived on the near side of a tule screen, coming up on the other side to rejoin them. One of the brood which came out and swam around making a pretty little wake across its bay, had a Robin-like chirp, and as it took note of me gave a droll bob of the head, which proved a family mannerism.

As I watched the interesting family, a muskrat swam by, nose and ears out of water, leaving a long wake behind him. When he had nearly reached the tule wall, he disappeared, and bubbles rose above him. As this was about where the Herons had so mysteriously lit on the water, he had doubtless gone down into a muskrat house. He was seen again the next day, and as he swam past a family of half grown Grebes, they all looked at him, when one inquisitive little Pied-bill swam after him, close to his wake; and as the furry ears disappeared, he too went below, as if to investigate his strange neighbor's house.

The mother of this brood was not feeding them when I saw her, and when one seemed to hint that she should, she preened very pointedly—a way feathered mothers often enforce discipline. They were big enough to provide their own dinners, she must have thought. A parent Pied-bill in diving for food one day apparently met her Waterloo. Shaking her catch violently, she dived rapidly and excitedly, reappearing and diving, and again reappearing and diving. At this juncture two nearly grown young with dull orange bills swam in, one acting as if intending to tell his mother just what to do on the instant; but that apparently was not so easy, for when I last saw the trio they were swimming away through the marsh, nothing settled. Perhaps the old Pied-bill had tried to make way with a squirming mud puppy!

Wherever these small Grebes were seen, Coots were almost always in evidence, and from the road overlooking the eastern border of the lake, they were usually the commonest spots on the surface. From the wide tule border the querulous or appealing notes of young were generally to be heard, and often the crooning note of the old one, one of the pleasantest, most contented sounds that came from the lakes.

The Coots' Gateway, as I came to call an opening through the willows near the hunting lodge end of the road, led down to the tules, and a strip of ground covered with old stalks provided a convenient and popular platform on which the birds could stand to sun and plume themselves. When stopping to look in at the gateway, one day, I caught sight of a young Redhead and got just a glimpse of the mother, in a light that brought out the rare plum colored bloom only occasionally seen in life.

Here, early one August morning, I found four half grown Coots standing at the base of the green tule stalks. When they disappeared, my attention was absorbed by distressed infantile cries coming from within the tules. They decreased after a time and before long a red and black headed nestling Coot appeared through the reeds and climbed up weakly onto the platform, where he

lay down exhausted, crying in the feeble, forlorn little tones to which I had been listening. He was so small and weak that I imagined he had fallen out of his nest and that his first distressed outcry had come from the unexpected plunge.

Where was his mother? A call from an invisible adult made him react sufficiently to take a few toddling steps in its direction; but then, as if his dimly awakened mind lost its grasp, he stopped, fixed his feathers a little, and picked feebly from the ground. Again, when his calls were answered by a *peep*, as from a brother inside the tules, he made a weak run toward the sound, but tripped and went on his bill. Calling forlornly he picked himself up, but then sat down on the ground, too tired to stand, pathetic little chick! Just then a Black-crowned Night Heron rose from a neighboring blind with a loud *squawk*, and two old Coots with their nearly grown young swam out, one of the parents with lake weed in its bill. The sun came out lighting up the yellow bases of the reeds, turning the tule marsh into a miniature green forest, the reflected stems patterning the smooth water and making a most attractive swimming-pool. The nestling, creeping out a few feet farther, came near the edge of the pool and I wondered whether he were feeling the ancestral lure of the water or whether, having been so prematurely projected from his nest—granting my surmise to be correct—the dry warm nest still dominated his weak little mind.

At half past nine, after an hour and a half alone in the world, he had nearly stopped calling, and when a motherly *te-tub* came from inside the tules, answered only faintly. He was getting rested, however, and soon went to work to preen his bedraggled plumage. As he combed his short bristly hairs with his red sealing wax bill, his markings came out plainly—his reddish crown encircled by black hairs with whitish hairs beneath. His stringy wings blew out as tiny flippers. But before his toilet could go farther, over he went, almost on his back.

That his mother might get courage to come to him, I moved, a little at a time, farther and farther back among the willows, at each move losing sight of him among the old dead tule stalks on the dark ground, finding him again only by means of his reddish head—of which interesting fact I made note. While I sat watching him through my willow screen, a Yellow Warbler flew down on the platform, looked about jauntily and then flew up clinging to the reeds, hunting for insects or, perhaps, threads for a second nest. A pair of Redwings also flew down to look over the platform for something they wanted. Then a large flock of Ducks passed over head, from one of the eastern lakes, flying on to light down by the Coulee.

Would the mother Coot never come? Was she still brooding the brother nestlings, or was she down on the water feeding them while waiting for me to go? Meanwhile the small Redhead had again been working on his toilet, and though he still looked decidedly hairy, seemed comparatively dry and fluffed out. Just then, losing his balance, he slipped into the water. Before I had time to wonder what he would do, he hurriedly climbed back onto dry land, his mind not yet free from the dry nest. This plunge, however, probably put him in a coming on mood, for it was not so bad as his first plunges, and when, after a little more preening, he slipped into the water again, he settled down on its surface with the ease of long generations of aquatic ancestors, and

swimming off disappeared down a tule lane, calling loudly as if, hidden in their mazes, he was sure of finding the mother who would care for all his wants.

The next time I passed the Coot Gateway, I was hurrying by absent-mindedly and surprised four small Redheads standing on the platform. Was my little friend among them, happily reunited to his family? The mother must have been sitting down resting, for she jumped up and vanished, the four young also disappearing by magic. After that piece of consummate carelessness, creep in as noiselessly as I might, it was all in vain. I had lost a rare opportunity. One pretty sight near the Gateway, though quite aside the mark, was a long row of young dragon flies on a telephone wire.

I often stopped at the Gateway on my way back and forth to our mail box which the crippled carrier, on the return curve of his thirty mile route, passed at intervals varying widely with roads and weather. Coming in sight far up the second angle of the road, following section lines between grain fields, the head of his old white horse could be watched till it reached the box, and then watched disappearing down the highway—a highway that seemed merely an incident, winding down between endless fields of ripening grain. Before the harvest, the fields that had changed from green to gold under my eyes, softened to pale straw color that, as the landscape stretched away, went well with the creamy horizon cloudlets. In one long interval of waiting, when resting in a recess in the wheat with camp stool for pillow, I watched the silky long-bearded wheat softly blowing across the sky till the blue seemed a wondrous blue and the prairie clouds seemed to gather protectingly close.

(*To be continued*)

A SHORT PAPER ON THE HUTTON VIREO

By CLARK C. VAN FLEET

WITHIN the last two years I have made the acquaintance of a new friend among the birds, namely, the Hutton Vireo (*Vireo huttoni huttoni*), to me one of the most interesting of our California songsters. This is a common enough bird in Sonoma County, but one that must be searched for and his acquaintance sought, in order to know him well. His is a quiet, unobtrusive nature, and his olive green coat blends so well with his surroundings that many individuals might be passed, in good territory, by an unobservant person, before gaining a glimpse of one.

The Hutton Vireo is not a bird likely to draw attention to himself. There is no fluttering of wings or hasty glances here and there for food, such as distinguishes the Kinglet; no hammering or pounding and gay chattering or scolding, in the manner of the Plain Titmouse. His sober mantle of olive green is not less subdued than his movement from branch to branch, and tree to tree, his quiet peering under leaves and bark scales, where he takes toll of the teeming insect life. Occasionally a large insect will fall his prey; he will then stop and diligently snip off the wings and legs before attempting to swallow it. Rarely, he will dive forth from the protection of the trees at a passing insect,